

1620

HINDSIGHT

Of Sundry Survivors

By Jody Morgan

Have you visited the Myles Standish homestead lately? The view is spectacular. The house burned to the ground a few years after Myles died in 1656, so it is not surprising that almost no trace of the greens he might have served at his table is visible. I say almost, because hidden in the grass this summer I did find at least one descendent of the plants brought to New England by the early settlers.

No longer gathered by appreciative hands, plantain survives in vacant lots and abandoned fields, and at the Standish property. John Josselyn, in his "New-Englands Rarities Discovered," published in 1672, counts it among "Such Plants as have Sprung up Since the English Planted and kept Cattle in New-England." Apparently, the Native Americans had no more use for it than we do, for Josselyn lists it as "Plantain, which the Indians call *Englissh-Mans Foot*, as though produced by their treading."

In the days when Duxbury was first farmed by Englishmen, young plantain leaves were eaten in salads. The seeds were useful as an alternative to linseed. Reference to the wound-healing properties of plantain can be found in both Shakespeare and Chaucer. In "A Garden of Herbs," Eleanor Rohde quotes this 1588 advice: "To Remedy the Feete that are Sore with Traveling. — Take Plantaine and stampe it well, and anoynt your feete with the juice thereof and the greefe will swage."

The dandelion is another plant Josselyn notes as an English immigrant. The young leaves were often used in salads and broths, and the blossoms were boiled with sugar and lemon to make dandelion wine. I understand that

the greatest enemy of cultivated dandelions is grass.

Long before managed care, herbs were used to maintain good health. According to Dutch folklore, one way to stay in perfect physical condition was to eat a dandelion salad every Monday and Thursday. In "Wildflower Folklore," Laura Martin also cites an 1821 herbal which recommends the use of dandelion root for impetigo, "the itch," and liver ailments.

A third plant arriving with the English, which we root out ruthlessly, is chickweed. Whether or not they imported it on purpose, the early settlers knew how to make excellent use of chickweed when it sprouted. A good source of vitamins A and C, chickweed greens gathered before the

old-fashioned in her childhood, Alice Morse Earle (1851-1911) pleads for the reinstatement of the fragrant box-edgings, such as that which now borders the herb beds at Ezra Weston's back door.

Many of the culinary herbs we favor today have been in constant use since the Romans invaded the British Isles. Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme, marjoram, sorrel, savory and mint were among the first plants to grace New England gardens. But mint is so invasive that the original plan for the current King Caesar House herb garden did not include it. With the exception of the miniature boxwood, however, all of the plants came as donations from Duxbury herbalists. The spec-

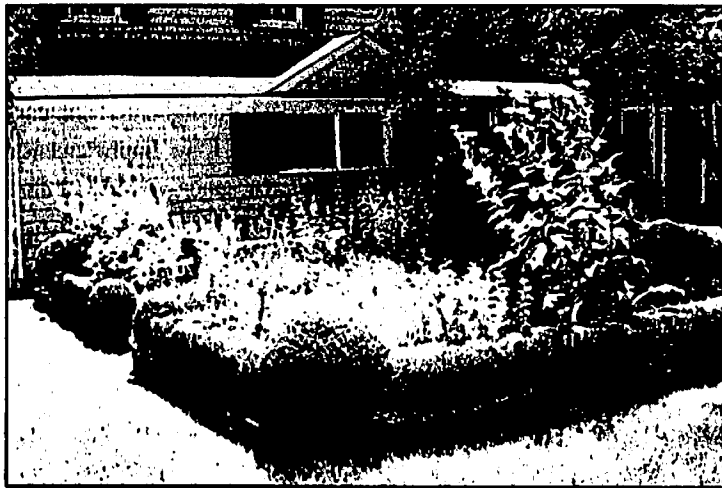
sonally attest to the fact that cuttings can survive without soil or water for extended periods. Incidentally, in addition to its culinary uses, mint was also employed as a strewing herb in churches.

Medicinal plants have gone in and out of favor over the centuries. Elecampane, *Inula helenium*, was supposed, according to one legend, to have been carried by Helen of Troy when Paris made off with her. Another tale ties the name "helenium" to King Priam's son, Helenus. It was planted in the earliest recorded herb gardens. Josselyn includes it among the herbs New Englanders were eager to cultivate during the 17th century, and it was still planted in 18th-century American gardens.

Elecampane roots were used to make cough medicine and to aid digestion. But the huge leaves and tall, irregular limbs did not suit Victorian gardeners. Somehow, elecampane managed to survive in forgotten places until modern herbalists reclaimed it as a curiosity and were rewarded with a remarkably showy perennial with long-lasting yellow blossoms.

Fashion often dictates what we cherish and what we weed out of our yards. Many plants, like the Mayflower mint, are survivors. They are adept at seeking loca-

tions where they can reproduce in peace. What we consider a weed today may be a delicacy or a prescription medicine tomorrow. Or, like elecampane, it may simply be rediscovered as a delight to the eye. I have a space in my yard for wild flowers to seed themselves, but I don't welcome dandelions, chickweed and plantain to my lawn. As Gerard put it in his 1597 "Herbal": "by reason of the great commoditie and plenty of it growing every where ... it is needlesse to spend time about them."



Elecampane towers above its neighbors in the herb garden at the King Caesar House.

plant flowers were eaten the way we prepare spinach. In Elizabethan England, chickweed was further employed in reducing fever.

The current herb garden at the King Caesar House is less than a decade old. In 1808, when Jerusha Weston might have planned her kitchen garden, the herbs would probably have been found amongst the vegetables. We do not have a list of her favorites to guide us, but we do know which herbs were popular in America at the beginning of the 19th century. Writing about gardens

imen of mint that was offered could not be refused.

Passed down through the generations as a direct Mayflower descendant, this mint exhibits so many characteristics of the human passengers that documentation of its provenance seems unnecessary. It travels throughout the garden on strong runners, but seems happiest clustered with its own kind in the least conspicuous corners. Uproot it in one spot and it emerges in another. The stems are sturdy, the flowers decorative, but hardly pretentious. I can per-